

# Burning beds

BY JOAN FERLO TODD, RN

THE FIRE ALARM blasts the air at your hospital. The motor on a patient bed has overheated and begun to smoke. You and a co-worker rescue two patients, who are treated for smoke inhalation but recover.

## What can go wrong?

Since 1993, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has learned of 95 fires involving electric hospital beds. Most of the fires were associated with such factors as overheated bed motors, arcing from ill-fitting plugs, damaged plugs, missing ground pins, fluid leaks that damaged the circuit boards, missing components in the wiring, poor maintenance, or failure to heed manufacturers' warnings. One hospital bed fire was caused by the patient smoking in bed.


## What precautions can you take?

Fortunately, fires are rare—and you can keep them rare by using the FDA's safety tips, which are especially important for older beds. These tips assume that the facility has a fire prevention policy, such as rules prohibiting smoking or lighting candles. (Fire risks posed by oxygen administration aren't addressed here.)

- Inspect the bed's power cord for damage.
- Connect the power cord directly into a wall-mounted outlet that's in good working order, with no cracks or chips. The plug should fit tightly into the outlet. Any ground pin should be intact and secure.
- Don't connect the bed's power

cord to an extension cord or to a multiple-outlet strip.

- Don't cover any power cord with a rug. Heat may build up or the cord may be damaged.
- Inspect the floor beneath the bed for buildup of dust and lint, which could clog the motor; ask housekeeping to clean if necessary.
- Inspect the patient's bed control panel covering, looking for signs of damage where liquids could leak in.
- Test the bed and its controls, including patient lockout features, to ensure that the bed can move freely in both directions without damaging any cords.
- Check monitors and other patient equipment for signs of overheating or physical damage.
- Keep linens and clothes away from power sources.
- Tell maintenance staff about any unusual sounds, burning odors, or unusual movement of a bed.
- If you suspect overheating, follow your hospital's policy for fire safety and get the patient to a safe area if necessary.
- Check to make sure that manufacturers' recalls and safety notices are being followed.

For more information and tips for maintenance personnel, go to <http://www.fda.gov/cdrh/safety/bedfires.html>. 

Although you need to support the adverse event-reporting policy of your health care facility, you may voluntarily report a medical device that doesn't perform as intended by calling MedWatch at 1-800-FDA-1088 (fax: 1-800-FDA-0178). The opinions and statements in this report are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Department of Health and Human Services. Beverly Albrecht Gallauresi, RN, BS, MPH, coordinates Device Safety

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